

Shadows and Illuminations: Interpreting and Framing Extraordinary Experience



Photo 5.1 Nyoman Kereta

5.1 STORY SUMMARY

Kereta was born in 1944 in a small rural village in Central Bali. He was a farmer his whole life and lives in the same extended family compound in which he was born. He remembers a pleasant childhood shaped by the

rhythms of rice agriculture and the Balinese ritual calendar. Then in 1965, when Kereta was twenty-one, his village was caught in the wave of violence that swept the nation following a purported coup by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and then a countercoup by General (later President) Suharto. Military and paramilitary forces purportedly belonging to the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI) entered his village looking for suspected members of the communist party. Kereta witnessed the roundup and massacre of several villagers in which both killers and victims were personal acquaintances. The troops singled out a number of villagers and had them march to a local cemetery. Although he was not targeted for violence, Kereta was extremely distressed by what he saw, and he felt he was in mortal danger. He sought refuge in the high branches of a tree so that no one could see him, and from there he bore witness to brutal killings, including individuals being hacked to death with machetes. Not long afterward, he witnessed his cousin take part in the brutal assassination of his own father outside of the family compound. Paramilitary members stabbed him with a sword and hit his head until his “brains splattered.” Kereta also witnessed his father’s eyes being gouged out with a pick. Some of the perpetrators were his neighbors. His father’s body was eventually buried in a local cemetery, but never given the proper Balinese cremation ceremony.

Soon after these horrifically traumatic events, Kereta’s long-standing problems with social withdrawal and fear began. He believed the constant terror he experienced in the wake of these killings weakened his life force. He had problems with his heart beating too rapidly and an “inner pressure” weighing down his body. For months after the massacre, he had difficulty eating and became very thin and withdrawn. He was jumpy, easily startled, and had periods when he felt his mind go blank. He was awakened by nightmares of being chased or people being butchered. In the years following the violence, Kereta became increasingly afraid of social gatherings and avoided public places and events. He withdrew from the social activities of his *banjar*, or village organization, and stopped participating in community work projects.

Then in 1974, he ate some eels that he had caught in an irrigated rice field, not knowing that they had been sprayed earlier that day with a powerful insecticide called Endrin. He became very ill, with symptoms of

vomiting and dizziness that lasted for months before he recovered. After some reluctance due to his commonly known vulnerable condition, Kereta had an arranged marriage with a younger woman. It was a difficult transition for the couple, although Kereta cared deeply for his wife. Overwhelmed by his difficulties, she ran away from him and returned to her family, but she eventually came back to Kereta. They had a son, and then in 1984, a daughter. Unfortunately, there were complications with the delivery and the baby girl died. Kereta describes this as the most difficult time in his life. In his grief he cried continuously.

Kereta began seeing small, black figures, which he believed to be spirits known as the *wong samar*, or “the invisible people,” a form of spirit being commonly recognized in Bali. He first saw the *wong samar* while cutting the grass in the rice field, describing them as wandering over the fields and hiding in stagnant water. The spirits made noises that gradually coalesced into words: “Why don’t you take care of yourself? Will you take care of us?” He felt the figures were competing with one another to enter his head and take possession of his body.

I wanted to hide in a quiet place, but there were always creatures and sounds. There were voices coming from the grass. There was an image of a black creature. The rice fields were full of voices.

When occupied by these spirits, Kereta would stay inside the family compound to avoid social contact. At other times, he would leave home for days, hiding in solitary places such as remote rice fields or the deeply cut canyons that crisscross the Balinese landscape. One *wong samar* being became his wife. When Kereta’s social withdrawal grew so severe that it prevented him from participating in family and community events, and from leaving his bedroom, his family brought him to a *balian*, or traditional healer. According to the *balian*, his illness was caused by witchcraft. Kereta stayed at the healer’s compound for a month to receive treatment but his problems persisted, and the healer brought Kereta to both the state mental hospital and to a local government hospital in Denpasar, which had a small inpatient psychiatric unit. The family believed that Kereta’s illness was in part caused by weak nerves (B.I. *lemah syaraf*), and he would recover more quickly at the hospital.



Photo 5.2 Kereta receiving treatment by a *balian usada* or literate healer

According to the initial intake notes, Kereta seemed dazed (B.I. *melamun*, B.B. *bengong*), confused (B.I. *bingung*, B.B. *paling*), and disturbed (B.I. *pikiran terganggu*, B.B. *inguh-inguhan*). He reported that he was dizzy (B.I. *pusing*, B.B. *pengeng*) and having difficulty breathing (B.I. *sesak napas*, B.B. *sesek*). He was diagnosed on the basis of the PPDGJ (*Pedoman Penggolongan dan Diagnosis Gangguan Jiwa*), the Indonesian diagnostic manual, which is based on the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) systems. The initial diagnosis was Paranoid Acute Problem (298.30). A subsequent diagnosis, which was made at the one-year evaluation, was Schizophrenia Paranoid type (295.3) on the basis of the following *DSM-IV-TR* (2000) criteria: delusions resembling thought insertion, auditory and visual hallucinations, and delusions of a persecutory nature. Kereta was given chlorpromazine and another antipsychotic. The voices of the *wong samar* gradually subsided, until after about one week when the voices became “hazy and unclear.” He was hospitalized for two more weeks and then discharged.

Kereta’s experiences with spirit beings gradually waned. When he experienced a relapse in symptoms, he sought treatments, including traditional healing and pharmacological interventions prescribed by psychiatrists at the local and state mental hospitals in Bali. Certain social and political stressors

continued to trouble him in his daily life, including enduring contact with neighbors and family members who took part in the violence against his loved ones during the events of 1965. This residual fear occasionally exacerbated his condition; for example, during the national election campaigns in 2002–2003, when Indonesia democratically elected its president for the first time, the spirits returned, asking Kereta to rejoin the Communist Party. In response to these lingering attacks, he wore a camouflage jacket and military helmet and slept outside in his family temple courtyard. He believed this prevented the spirits from entering his body and forcing him to return to the PKI.

After his discharge, Kereta returned to work as a farmer. He only took his medication briefly and intermittently because it was expensive and hard to procure from local pharmacies or community health centers. Occasionally, he engaged in community activities, but he continued to have difficulty socializing and sleeping, and he still experienced visitation by the spirits.

Kereta has come to terms with the fact that the spirit beings will be with him indefinitely. He seems to have gained a degree of peace with the shadows and illuminations that visit him, yet he also describes long periods where he does not see or hear any spirits at all. He contributes to the family livelihood through farming and making offerings to sell in the market, and is treated fondly by his wife, sons, and brother.

5.2 MULTIPLE WAYS TO FRAME AND INTERPRET PSYCHOTIC EXPERIENCE

Having complex relationships with spiritual beings, including seeing them, hearing them, or becoming a bodily host for them, would be *prima facie* evidence of a “bizarre delusion” as diagnosed by most psychiatrists in Western countries. But in Indonesia, there is a strong cultural context for the normalization of spirit possession and interaction with the spirit world. Balinese people have elaborate beliefs about, experiences of, and frameworks for understanding and communicating with spirit beings, and on the whole retain a comparatively intimate acquaintance with the spiritual world or invisible realm (Geertz 1994). Kereta’s experiences aligned with the normative sensory and behavioral repertoires of the cultural milieu.

The content of Kereta’s visions is deeply grounded in a culturally specific and commonly shared cosmology. *Wong samar*, the spirits Kereta regularly engages with, are a potent class of spirit beings that have links to Balinese

mythology and culture stretching back at least 700 years. People could avoid illness and death by paying tribute to the *wong samar* (Santikarma 1995). While it may seem bizarre that Kereta mentions being married to a *wong samar*, in Bali people can take such spirits—thought to have flattened upper lips, float an inch above the ground, and live in canyons or remote rice fields—as wives. They are reputed to be affectionate and loyal spouses if treated with respect, but vengeful if neglected (Wayan Sadha—personal communication). They remain ambivalent figures in folk belief; mystical or mysterious occurrences continue to be attributed to them, and even today some villages boast regular visits by *wong samar* at night, saying if you encounter one you might receive a special blessing (Lemelson 2014). Not every Balinese will see the *wong samar*, yet clearly Kereta’s beliefs about the *wong samar* and his propitious relationship with them have a deep cultural basis.

Kereta did not have many of the characteristic features of subtypes of schizophrenia previously operant in *DSM-IV* (1994): His speech production was normal, and while his range of activities was restricted when he was actively “delusional” and appearing shy and anxious, Kereta had a range of volitional activities adequate for his roles in his *banjar*. Given his personal history of trauma and ongoing surveillance by both paramilitary and political informants, Kereta’s other negative symptoms, such as his social isolation and loss of interest in the social world, should not be considered outright as a symptom of schizophrenia. These symptoms could be considered as adaptive because an openness of expression under these circumstances could have led to his imprisonment, or worse.

5.3 TRAUMA, HISTORY, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN *SHADOWS AND ILLUMINATIONS*

The lingering effects of the violence and upheaval of the mass killings of 1965 is a significant theme in *Shadows and Illuminations*. The supposed communist coup and the swift and bloody military response left many Indonesians physically injured, traumatized, and stigmatized. Kereta’s experiencing, witnessing, and remembering these episodes of violence and hardship were formative moments with long-lasting repercussions in his personal schema of worry, anxiety, and distress. Even after Suharto’s fall in 1998 the atmosphere around public discussion of the events of 1965–66 and beyond had become less tense and increasingly more open; many

people still felt uncomfortable discussing the events and could face repercussions and trouble on neighborhood, village, and state levels for speaking out against the New Order government, speaking freely about past violence, or acknowledging past association with the Communist Party, no matter how minimal.

The events of 1965 penetrated deeply into Kereta's intrapsychic life, but also affected his social support network. At the time of the 1965 violence, Kereta was the only male in the house responsible for defending the family home (B.B. *nindihan natal*) when it was attacked by the *tameng*. Even after the violence, Kereta could do nothing but look on as his older sister was forced to marry one of the most vicious officers of the paramilitaries; this man is now his brother-in-law. Family members linked this relationship to the continuing pressures (B.I. *tekanan*) of his fears. Another neighbor believed that Kereta had been so troubled by the events because it was his second cousin (B.B. *mindon*) who encouraged the militia members (*tameng*) to attack Kereta's home. Violence over land reform (Robinson 1998) and anger toward relatives over their role as informants (Dwyer and Santikarma 2004) are common themes related to the events of the September 30th movement and mass killings in Bali (Cribb 2004; Dwyer 2009; Dwyer and Santikarma 2004; Retsikas 2006; Zurbuchen 2005). It is significant that Kereta had never narrated these events to his wife, sons, or extended family and certainly not to any of his *banjar* neighbors, some of whom participated in the mass killings. He had never even discussed this with those neighbors who had similar experiences.

A Western psychiatric perspective might hypothesize that Kereta is in part suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder that can occur after a traumatic or life-threatening event. Common symptoms of PTSD are re-experiencing events (flashbacks); hyper-arousal (feeling jittery or keyed up); and insomnia, depression, or numbness. In some cases, symptoms may not emerge for a long time following exposure to traumatic events (Briere and Scott 2015; Boehnlein et al. 2004; Kinzie 2016).

A diagnosis of PTSD with psychotic features encompasses some of Kereta's illness experience and his subsequent relationships with spirits. By comparison, among Cambodian refugees who experienced the traumas associated with the Khmer Rouge regime, a prominent cultural shaping of PTSD symptomatology is visitations by ghosts and other spirit beings (Boehnlein et al. 2004). There may be some connection among Kereta's initial traumas in 1965, the reactivation of loss, fear, and sadness as a result

of losing his child in 1984, and his subsequent experience of the spirit beings. However, most Balinese people who witnessed the mass killings in 1965 (and they number in the hundreds of thousands) did not develop close relationships with spirit beings.

The neurobiological processes underlying an acute post-traumatic stress response have universal components, but their temporal configuration and interaction are powerfully shaped by how developmental, social, historical, and cultural contexts intersect with psychobiology (Kirmayer et al. 2007; Hinton and Good 2015; Hinton and Hinton 2014). For example, the complexity of remembering and forgetting painful past events in the Indonesian context is affected by prevalent cultural ideas about emotional expression. Javanese and Balinese cultures value interpersonal harmony (Browne 2001; Wikan 1989; Heider 1991) and therefore call for the management and regulation of strong or negative feelings. Ignoring these cultural norms for containment challenges the cosmological order and so risks exposing the community to natural disasters and other catastrophic retribution (Santikarma 1995).

Psychological processes, whether they are healthy or distressed, are not solely located in the individual, but also constructed through discursive processes of narrative, labeling, attribution, interpretation, and interaction that are fundamentally social. From this perspective, a psychiatric diagnosis can be considered at once a potentially useful tool and yet at the same time a “reducing valve” (Huxley 2009) that excludes many areas of relevance to Kereta’s story, treatment, and subjectivity. In studying and attempting to ameliorate mental distress, cultural differences and individual subjectivity must be understood, contextualized, and respected (Kirmayer et al. 2015).

In local terms, rather than globalized psychiatric terms, Kereta described his illness as a Balinese illness category, *ngeb*, an illness caused by witnessing something horrific or bizarre. As a result, sufferers put themselves in a self-imposed exile characterized by muteness and a lack of participation in the social world. Kereta believes his *ngeb* began with the witnessing of the massacre in 1965. This initial *ngeb* was compounded by visual and auditory hallucinations of the *wong samar* world. The shock of these events weakened his *bayu*, or life force. Throughout insular Southeast Asia, *bayu* is seen as present in all matter, both living and dead (Laderman 1991). However, it is a force that is sensitive to disturbance and can be depleted through startle, fear, or other disturbance of balance (Wikan 1989). *Bayu* needs to be strong or large (B.B. *gede*) to maintain health. Kereta felt that his continually weakened *bayu* accounted for the predilection of his spirit beings to visit

him. *Bayu* can be affected by emotional states such as sadness, and a cluster of symptoms—such as weakness, heaviness, and feeling empty—indicate that the *bayu* is weak or gone.

Kereta chose to disclose his painful and terrifying experiences only in the last meeting with the lead author, in 1997, which was significant. After ongoing interviews, which perhaps comprised the most intimate and in-depth conversations he had had about the events of 1965, he felt safe enough to disclose a personally difficult and politically charged story. As he was aware that the lead author was returning to the United States, he confidently disclosed his story, and thus helped begin the *Affliction* series.

While Kereta used the opportunity to share his harrowing episode of political violence for the first time, he did not seem to be re-experiencing unbearable distress during the retelling, and did not ask to stop filming. In subsequent interviews, from 2000 to the present, Kereta has always seemed to appreciate the visits and discussions, taking very active part in both reviewing old material and offering new aspects of his life experiences. He also participated in several trips to different healers, including Dewa Gde Alit, the healer he had lived with during his extended *ngeb* episode following the death of his daughter.

5.4 LAST ENCOUNTERS

Kereta's symptoms have waxed and waned over the succeeding years, and at the last visit, in late 2013, Kereta had been hospitalized with meningitis for several months. As a result he was quite frail and had lost his hearing. He was, as always, seemingly pleased to renew the friendship and continue the discussion of his life and experiences. He attended a screening of *40 Years of Silence* (Lemelson 2009), another film in which he features prominently, and seemed to very much enjoy his status as local cinema star.

The last interview with Kereta was rather difficult. As a result of his becoming deaf, all the questions had to be written out on large white paper for him to slowly read. As he would read each one, he would laugh and give his loud responses.

His wife stated that he still sees and hears the spirits, but when asked, Kereta reported:

The black magic spirits? They are invisible, unseen. I cannot see the black magic spirits . . . But I still see the barong.¹

Later:

There are still many spirits that came into the body, the black magic from the head of the PKI wants to enter the body through my back. They get into my memories. There's a lot of them.

His wife noted that he frequently laughs and talks to himself. About his wife:

I still love my wife. I do, I have to . . . but my wife is scared of me. She is scared to sleep together with me. Because she is scared of my sacrificed body, I am the sacrificed body.

And at last, he speaks of his relation with his troubled history and by extension, the troubled and unresolved history of Indonesia:

Oh no, I am not scared of the Communist Party leader (spirit). I'm not now, he's my friend. But we don't dare spread communism, we're both scared. The leader of the PKI is scared to spread the lessons about communism. But we are both at peace.

NOTE

1. The protective dragon- like spirit, immortalized in Mead's "*Trance and Dance in Bali*".

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